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Improvement of Speaking Ability through Interrelated Skills

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Abstract

How to improve students' ability of speaking English? That is the key point we are concerned about. This paper discusses the possibility and necessity of improving students' ability by combining the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

Keywords: Speaking ability, Improvement, Integrated skills

With the rapid development of science and technology, international trade and exchanges between countries increase greatly. Therefore, it is becoming more and more necessary to understand spoken English in different situations.

1. Reasons of Causing Less Effective Teaching

How to develop the ability of oral communication of students in colleges and universities? How to help them communicate freely and make them express their ideas clearly? These are questions troubling many teachers. Why is it so hard to get our students to speak English fluently? I believe there may be several reasons:

A. In previous years the methodology was teacher-centred with a focus only on reading or writing. Grammar was considered of primary importance and was often taught through a separate grammar book. Vocabulary teaching consisted mainly of memorization either of synonyms or Chinese 'equivalents'. Writing lessons consisted of memorization and writing of model compositions, combined with grammar and vocabulary exercises. Speaking skills were not dealt with seriously in any way (students were not expected to interact).

B. Most of the teaching activities are of the traditional modes, such as reading the dialogue, reciting texts, doing translation, and the materials chosen for the students are non-authentic. Usually students feel deadly bored instead of appreciating them and accepting them.

C. Many teachers only lay emphasis on accuracy with no thought of fluency, which makes students worry too much about their mistakes.

D. Almost all important examinations do not consist of an oral test, which causes both the teachers and students to neglect oral English.

E. Teachers are reluctant in using Communicative Approach because of their deficiency in speaking ability themselves.

F. Students' attitude towards their learning process is also a factor that causes less effective teaching.

2. Analysis of Current Teaching Approaches

Although speaking has been included in the educational plan for English teaching in colleges and universities in the past years, the percentage of time devoted to activities in which students can communicate with each other in English remains small in the whole class. Speaking is the skill that the students will be judged upon most in real-life situation .It is an important part of everyday interaction and most often the first impression of a person is based on his/her ability to speak fluently and comprehensibly .So, as teachers, we have a responsibility to prepare the students as much as possible to be able to speak English in the real world outside the classroom and the testing room.

Speaking is a skill, just like swimming, driving a car, or playing ping-pong. Too often, in the traditional classroom, the learning of English has been relegated to linguistic knowledge only, e.g. knowledge of vocabulary and grammar rules, with little or no attention paid to practicing language skills. How can we tell the difference between knowledge and skill? Bygate (1987:4) points out "one fundamental difference is that both can be understood and memorized, but only a skill can be imitated and practiced." One of the characteristics of speech in everyday life is that speech is spontaneous. That is, in most situations, people do not plan ahead of time what they are going to say. Only in more formal situations, such as when a person has been asked to give a speech, do people plan and organize their speech.

Similarly, the method of giving priority to listening and speaking has been advocated, yet it has little effect. Both teachers and students think it neither realistic nor necessary to teach or learn speaking .It seems to them that their main objective is reading not speaking. They may also think speaking is not a skill worth cultivating because Chinese

students have little chance to communicate with native speakers. And more readily they will admit that whether the students can go to university or a college mainly depends on the reading and writing, not speaking, for almost all the important examinations do not consist of oral tests.

Pattern drills are often arranged in each unit of textbooks, most of which are not authentic but mechanical. They do not reflect the real purpose of communicative ideas. Many textbooks are crammed with a lot of grammar, reading materials and too many boring vocabulary exercises.

In addition, many teachers themselves are not fluent in speaking English, nor do they know how to teach it in a big class. It is really difficult for a teacher to get everybody to have the chance to practise speaking English.

Let me take “dialogue teaching “as an example. Most teachers of English follow the traditional way: learn the vocabulary, read the dialogue, translate it into Chinese, have difficult points explained, memorize the dialogue .As a result, an overwhelming majority of students cannot make themselves understood, let alone talk with the native speakers after years of learning English.

3.Theories of Teaching Oral English

A. Functions of Spoken Language

Brown & Yule (1983a: 1-3; 1983b: 11-16) mention that language can be seen as having two functions: transferring information (transactional function) and establishing/maintaining social relationships (interactional function). Interactional spoken language is characterised by shifts of topic and short turns. The accuracy and clarity of information is not of primary importance, and facts/views are not normally questioned or challenged. In transactional spoken language longer turns are the norm and there is a clear topic. Since the effective transference of information is the goal, interlocutors are actively engaged in the negotiation of meaning. Brown & Yule summarise the above stating that whereas interactional language is "listener oriented", transactional language is "message oriented".

B. The Possibility and Necessity of Teaching Oral English

In my opinion, those who think the major objective of the students is reading not speaking have ignored some obvious pedagogical facts :

Firstly, generally speaking, people have the notion that learning English has something to do with oral English. When one says some students are good at English, people will naturally think he or she can speak English well.

Secondly, oral English can be very useful for the development of reading and writing skills .As Rivers points out: when we read and write, we call upon what we know of the language orally. (Rivers, 1968, 20). He goes on to say that there must be a connection between reading and speaking .If the students are reading, then they are using their oral English, too .If a student has poor English, his reading ability may also be poor. Similarly, Rivers (1968) argues that writing involves oral ability as well.

Although many teachers with poor oral ability may have some difficulty in teaching English, however, it is possible for them to do so. They may teach oral English by an indirect method. They may use a recorder to provide an authentic accent and some authentic materials like dialogue for students to imitate. They can also make good use of class time for active participation by all their students .So the teachers can make up for their deficiency in oral ability by encouraging the students’ participation with prepared lessons, highly organized activities and effective techniques.

C. The Importance of Using Integrated Skills in Teaching Oral English

As Harmer suggests: one skill cannot be performed without another. It is impossible to speak in a conversation if you do not listen as well, and people seldom write without reading (Harmer ,1991,52).

The table below shows how all four skills are related (Byrne,1991,8).

Spoken Language	Understanding ,Speaking
Receptive Skills	Understanding ,Reading
Productive Skills	Speaking, Writing
Written Language	Reading ,Writing

Since the four language skills of listening , speaking reading and writing are interrelated and interacted with each other , it may be suggested that the four basic skills should be taught inclusively rather than separately ,as Byrne argues, we need to see why integrated skills activities are important :

a) They provide opportunities for using activities naturally, not just practicing it .

b) Many pair and group work activities call for a variety of skills sometimes simultaneously, in order to involve all the

learners.

c) Students seem to learn better when they are engaged on activities more than one skill. (1991,130)

Therefore, when we teach oral English, we should get the students involved in an oral communicative activity to do some writing or reading or listening in order to accomplish the task which the activity asks them to perform.

D. Integrating Skills in Activities

Byrne argues that: "we are not of course suggesting that single skill activities are not effective: there will in fact be many occasions when we shall ask the students just to talk or read or write, because this is appropriate." He then emphasizes, "equally, however ,we should be looking for opportunities to knit skills together, because this is what happens in real life ."(Byrne,1976,131). As we all know, the main aim of foreign language teaching is to help students achieve some kinds of communicative skills in the foreign language. Therefore, the teacher should organize classroom activities, create a free atmosphere within the class or group and give the students hints to use the activities in class to integrate their skills.

The following activities may be well recommended to show how to integrate skills by getting the students to work in pairs or groups:

a. Communication Activities

•Describing and drawing.

•Finding the difference between two partially identical pictures.

Rixon & Byrne (1979) and Harmer (1983) refer to the above two activities as "communication games".)

•Discussing ideas/views/opinions -notably students are engaged in activities in which they have to:

—Choose from a list of (unalterable) given statements the ones they most agree/disagree with.

—Choose from a list of given statements the ones they agree with and modify the remaining ones according to their opinion.

—Rank a number of statements according to their beliefs/opinions.

—Agree on and formulate statements expressing their views on a given subject and then discuss them in different groups (having to reformulate the ones they disagree on according to the second group's opinion).

The activities mentioned are selected/adopted in order to provide the students with a context in which they can re-integrate the strategies/skills dealt with in each lesson, and to lead students to "become used to dealing with the kinds of unpredictable problems which reciprocal speech brings into (these) interaction situations" (notably informal discussion and informal planning/decision making). Bygate terms these activities as "two-way" and argues that they "generate more talk and more use of negotiation procedures".

Such activities are "functional communication activities" ("processing information" and "sharing and processing information"). The stimulus for communication comes from the need to discuss and evaluate (these) facts. Learners must agree, justify and persuade in order to reach a common decision. Some experts refer to such activities as "interaction activities" in which personal meaning can be conveyed.

b. Questionnaires

Questionnaires are a simple way of giving the students meaningful question and answer practice .For use they should relate to a topic of some kinds, e.g. like and dislike about food, activities, abilities etc. the answer required should be either yes or no, or one of the frequency adverbs (never, hardly ever, sometimes, quite often, etc.)

If students are going to write their own questionnaires, it is helpful to elicit some ideas from the class first and perhaps write these on the board. Then ask the students to make up their own questionnaires, using some of these items. They can work in pairs for this, thus providing an additional source of talk. They may interview more than one student. They can also be asked to report what they have learned to another student or to the whole class.

When students of pairs or groups collaborate on the production of the questionnaire, they will talk and write .At the interviewing stage, they integrate talking and writing as well .In comparing the results, they have reading and talking.

c. Quizzes

Quizzes are similar to questionnaires but the answers are usually factual, which often involve knowledge. To turn quiz writing into an oral practice activity, you must ask the students to work in pairs to produce the quiz. This will involve talking and writing. Each pair should then ask another pair of students to answer the quiz orally, which involves some talking, listening and writing as well. When the quiz is passed back to the students who write it, they will get reading and talking integrated.

In short, from those types of activities suggested above, we may notice that those activities can introduce a "talk "component into the normally silent activities of reading and writing .We may also find how purposefully the skills are used in the way in which the students talk, read or write "in order to get something done "(Byrne,1976,132).

4. Conclusion

The choice of the topic was greatly determined by the fact that very little attention had been given to student interaction and speaking ability during the previous years. As a result, students had developed inhibitions towards using the target language that had a negative impact on their oral performance. It would, therefore, be an opportunity and a challenge for me to examine the effectiveness of certain activities and techniques in helping students shed their inhibitions and become more fluent communicators. By discussing and exploring how to integrate the skills in activities to make the teaching of oral English more effective, I hope we can find more methods to improve speaking ability of our students through interrelated skills.

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